

Spring 2022

Poetic Self-Representation Among Russian and British Female Poets in the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries

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POETIC SELF-REPRESENTATION AMONG RUSSIAN AND BRITISH FEMALE POETS
IN THE LATE 18TH AND EARLY 19TH CENTURIES

by

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Bachelor of Arts
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

Comparative Literature

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2022

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband, Scott who believed in me and supported me through the process and Dr. Paula Feldman who inspired me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Alexander Ogden and Dr. Judith Kalb of the Russian Department and Dr. Paula Feldman from the English Department of the University of South Carolina whose support and valuable criticism and suggestions helped me produce my best work on this project and enrich the body of scholarship on women poets.

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the development of self-representation by Russian women poets of the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century through comparison with the women poets in England of the same period. The comparative analysis of the works composed by Ekaterina Urusova, Aleksandra Murzina, Anna Bunina, Mary Julia Young, Mary Scott, Janet Little, and others provides insight into women poets' practices of exceeding the boundaries of gender-defined art to inhabit literary discourse traditionally occupied by male poets and expose the artificiality of gender and literary genre relations and engage with a variety of political, religious, and cultural issues – otherwise inappropriate for women poets.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 The Nation-Building Project: Ekaterina Urusova and Mary Scott	6
Chapter 2 Addressing the Readers: Aleksandra Murzina and Janet Little	24
Chapter 3 Professional Poets: Anna Bunina and Mary Julia Young	35
Chapter 4 The Deceptive Muse: Anna Bunina and Anna Laetitia Barbauld.....	49
Works cited.....	61

INTRODUCTION

Poetry was an essential source for definitions of “authenticity, naturalness, and cultural significance” (Shiach 3) in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is especially important in the context of Russia, where the culture is rife with literary references. One cannot study Russian thought without understanding the role that literature was playing therein (Monas 77). However, in much Russian literature women characters were rarely portrayed as independent persons with complicated psychology. As Rosalind J. Marsh suggests, “female characters are generally depicted from the outside, seldom described in detail, and largely presented through male eyes” (6).

Women poets sought to dispense with this notion and, instead, tell their own stories. To situate the development of women’s writing, it is useful to compare it with a different tradition of women authors. I chose a tradition that is culturally part of the Western European world, but one whose ties with Russia were not as strong as the French: the British tradition of women’s poetry.

When we consider the comparison with British female poets, it is important to keep in mind the unequal literary development of both traditions. Amanda Ewington offers a useful summary of the history of Russian literature in the eighteenth century that helps to contextualize women’s writing. Before the eighteenth century, Russia had no established secular literary tradition, art, or civic life, and elite Russian women did not participate in public life at court (1-3). With the country’s rapid Westernization, initiated

by Peter the Great (1672-1725), the situation began changing. The first half of the eighteenth century is characterized by discussions about the literary and poetic style and language, discussions which arose in 1730s. The Russian genre system, owing much to French neoclassicism, evolved between the 1730s and 1750s (11) when the hierarchy of genres was beginning to lose its popularity in Europe (12). Russian women authors began cautious attempts at publishing their works only several decades after men.¹

By contrast, England already had a tradition of the advancement of women writers and scholars by the middle of the eighteenth century. They served as an indicator of the sophistication and civility of British society, reflected in many contemporary publications, e.g., George Ballard's *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752), Duncombe's *The Femiuiad* (1754), Thomas Amory's *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1755) and George Colman and Bonnell Thornton's anthology *Poems by Eminent Ladies* (1755) (Haslett 93–94). Eighteenth-century British society in general experienced a significant growth in the number of women writers, which paralleled the rising interest in women's conditions among different nations. People in Britain now measured a nation's success and prosperity by the cultural achievements of women (Eger 124).

Therefore, as Ewington suggests, Russian women “lagged behind their European counterparts by four centuries” (2). Consequently, “any protest against the patriarchal

¹ The first officially recognized woman's poem appeared in 1759 by Ekaterina Kniazhnina (née Sumarokova, 1746-97), the daughter of the poet and playwright Aleksandr Sumarokov (Ewington 33, Kelly ctd. in Cornwell et al. 35). The first journal for women, Nikolai Novikov's *Modnoe ezhemesiachnoe izdanie, ili Biblioteka dlia damskogo tualeta* (*Fashion Monthly, or Library for a Lady's Toilette*) was created in 1779 (Rosilyn, 2000, 23), whereas, for example, the first English periodical for women, *Ladies' Mercury* appeared in 1693, over 80 years prior (Stearns 38).

culture...was unheard of prior to the turn of the nineteenth century, five hundred years after the appearance of the 'other voice' in Western Europe" (10).²

A new development in Russia occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century when female participation in literature increased due to the works of Nikolai Karamzin who proclaimed femininity to be the new guiding principle for Russian literature (Rosenholm and Savkina 162). As a result, while it increased female presence and "legitimized femininity as publicly significant and creative" (163), it also placed the idea and image of a woman writer within the confines delineated in his "Epistle to Women" (1796) (ibid.), and it was only in the 1820s that the situation changed (Andrew 53).³

My study reflects important milestones in the development of the self-representation of Russian women poets who challenged male dominance and prejudice, juxtaposing Russian poems with thematically-related English material. I begin in Chapter 1 with, perhaps, the most notable early statement, the preface to her cycle of poems, *Heroides Dedicated to the Muses* (1777), in which Princess Ekaterina Urusova addresses the audience speaking with her own voice. I compare Urusova with Mary Scott's *The Female Advocate* (1774). Written at almost the same time, *The Female Advocate*, like Urusova's poems, features a gallery of female portraits and is related to the issue of national identity.

² Nikolai Novikov conducted a study in 1772 and named only 9 women among 317 Russian authors, of whom only 5 wrote poetry. Nearly half a century later, in 1826, the catalog listed only 14 women poets, with some beginning their literary activities around 1810. Among them, Urusova was the only female poet of the eighteenth century to publish a considerable number of works (Rosslyn, 2000, 410).

³ Nesterenko observes that women's writing was not regarded seriously at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the 1820s and 1830s the situation slightly changed, and while women authors were no longer considered unusual, they acquired a reputation as salon authors and, consequently, were seen as unimportant (59-60).

An analysis of Aleksandra Murzina's "To My Readers" (1799) juxtaposed with Janet Little's "To the Public" (1792) follows in Chapter 2, as I think that this is the point in the history of Russian women's writing when, in the words of Amanda Ewington, the "challenges to male prejudice... [became] quite pointed and specific" (16). This comparison is interesting because, as I show, they come from different economic and social strata: Murzina, like most Russian contemporary female authors, is a woman of nobility, while Little is a Scottish working-class writer. Nevertheless, the expectations of them, as well as their attitudes, are similar.

The two final chapters are devoted to the first Russian female author to make a living off her pen, Anna Bunina. She wrote during the time when the aforementioned ideas of Karamzin proliferated, and she resisted notions of pleasing literary style and the identity of a *poetess*. The two poems from her collection *The Inexperienced Muse* (part one, 1809; part two, 1812) address issues that women authors were bound to face. Chapter 3 focuses on the comparison of her poem "My Portrait Drawn at Leisure During Autumn Gales for Friends" (1809) and Mary Julia Young's "An Ode to Fancy" (1795) and "To a Friend, on His Desiring Me to Publish" (1798). My analysis demonstrates the way that Bunina and Young expose gender-defined poetic genres and treat the issue of fame and ambition. Chapter 4, focused on Bunina's poem "Conversation between Me and the Women" (1812), reveals another expectation of women who turned to writing. Other female readers expected the poet to act as their mouthpiece and be representative of their community. The chapter shows that in order to conduct these negotiations, Bunina adopts the mask of a deceiving muse inspiring her verses. The same technique was used by Anna Laetitia Barbauld in "Washing Day" (1797). Although this poem thematically differs

from others in my analysis, it merits a discussion on account of its innovative nature. We see that while formally the Russian women's tradition has caught up with the Western world, the ways in which Russian women articulate their perspective relative to British women remain restricted; we find more daring and bolder approaches when it comes to the development of poetic devices in the British tradition.

Overall, the juxtaposition of the Russian and British women's poetic traditions of this period is not a simple one, largely because of the discrepancy in the pace of development, the shortage of material on the Russian side due to many works being unpublished or unattributable, and the lack of unanimity among women authors concerning ways of resistance and subversion. Nevertheless, it is valuable to continue this juxtaposition, assessment and re-assessment because, in the words of Paula Backscheider who, writing about the British poets of the eighteenth century:

Bringing such poems together, ordering and contextualizing them, and reconsidering the impact of gender pressures on poetry not only promises to give us a different, fuller landscape but also contributes to our understanding of women's history, of contemporary opinions about poetic kinds, and of genre itself (18–19)

CHAPTER 1
THE NATIONAL-BUILDING PROJECT: EKATERINA URUSOVA AND
MARY SCOTT

Heroides Dedicated to the Muses (1777) by Princess Ekaterina Urusova in Russia and *The Female Advocate* (1774) by Mary Scott in England are separated by only three years in publication date and are remarkably parallel in their focus. Designed as a celebration and defense for women's role in society, both poems showcase galleries of notable female characters. However, the two works represent distinct literary traditions, and the way that Urusova and Scott orchestrate their intentions is fundamentally different.

In the 1770s, Princess Ekaterina Urusova (1747-1817) engaged with the Classical heritage when she published a long poem *Polion, or The Misanthrope Enlightened* (1774) and three years later a cycle of poems entitled *Heroides Dedicated to the Muses* (1777) which comprised epistles imitating Ovid's *Heroides* (as they came to be known),⁴ a collection of poetic monologues consisting mostly of laments of female characters mistreated or deserted by their lovers. Urusova's *Heroides* feature female characters adapted from contemporary neo-classical dramas.⁵ However, she sidesteps the Ovidian

⁴ See Kennedy, Duncan F. "Epistolarity: The Heroides." *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, 2002, pp. 217–32.

⁵ Ovid's *Heroides* were not fully translated into Russian in the eighteenth century. It is unclear whether Urusova was able to read them in the original or any kind of translation or imitation.

emphasis on rage and despair in her depiction of fictional and historical women characters and, instead, chooses to focus on the conflict of duty, love, and virtue (Rubin-Detlev 100).

Some scholars have suggested that the focus is the figure of the monarch. For example, Kelsey Rubin-Detlev, in her discussion of the *Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns* in Urusova's work, maintains that the poet adopts the Ancient perspective with the goal to, first "formulate a unique concept of classical reception in Russia's age of sensibility and, second, to promote a strong alliance between an enlightened ruler and a powerful, ethically worthy nobility" (93). I believe, however, that Urusova's emphasis remains on the status of gender in Enlightenment culture.

Urusova begins her work with the portrayal of Russia as a formerly ignorant country turning to the Enlightenment and welcoming the advent of sciences and liberal arts:

Во древни времена, Российская страна,
В невежество была, во мрак погружена.
.....
Но в мрачности такой Россия озарилась,
И Лиры красота в пределах сих явилась. (152)
In ancient times the Russian land
Lay in ignorance, mired in darkness.
.....
[I]n that gloom Russia glowed as at dawn

And the lyre's beauty appeared in these parts. (153)⁶

Though cautiously, Urusova hints at the matter of the egalitarian aspect of the Enlightenment when she writes that the muses' "voice captivates *every* heart" (153) (emphasis added). This allows her to build her argument on the fact that this civilizing force affects everyone, men and women alike. Yet ideologically she departs from the goal of edification of women that the Empress had in mind.

It is true that Catherine was invested in women's education, and in 1764 she established a public boarding school for aristocratic girls, the Smolny Institute. In addition, the Novodevichy Institute for female students from lower social ranks was founded a year later, in 1765 (Clements 74). Though her reign was marked by efforts to instill Enlightenment values and to advance noble women's education, she was hardly aiming for anything other than the domestic sphere for women. Catherine defended women's schooling and refinement to ensure their ability to be proper mothers and carry out their civic duties to a monarch (75). Therefore Carol S. Nash argues that whereas the instruction of women in literacy was met with resistance, the ambition to advance women's education "represents a progressive call" (301): "the restraints inherent in this domestic orientation make it as much a campaign against excessive emancipation as a plea to remove women from complete ignorance" (301).

This is why, although with the advent of the Age of Enlightenment in Russia, as stated in the proem, "The female sex has also begun to sing" (153) (...начал воспевать у нас и женский пол), Urusova shifts the focus from Catherine to the importance of female participation in the nation building process:

⁶ Ewington's anthology does not include line numbers, therefore, I cite page numbers for the English translation in the bilingual edition.

На Росскую страну вселенна мечет взор,

Прославь ея, прославь, прекрасных Муз собор! (152)

The world casts its glance at the Russian land.

O host of beautiful Muses, glorify her! Glorify her! (153)

The feminine pronoun “her” corresponds to the feminine-gendered *strana* in the original text i.e. “country” (or “land” in Ewington’s translation). That is, Russia is now a proud part of the European world in the cultural and political sense, and Urusova’s enthusiastic exclamation for this newly-civilized nation to be celebrated by the muses is significant for several reasons.

First of all, it signals an intrinsic connection between the political and cultural spheres. Secondly, it is clear that Urusova employs the image of the muses entirely in its generic sense meaning “poetry” or “inspiration.” However, muses are, after all, the feminine embodiment of the poetic act, and throughout history ordinary women, by virtue of their beauty, grace, wisdom, etc., have often themselves been compared to muses. This association with Poetry rather than Poet did not escape the writing women. As Susan Brown wrote, “Poetry is for women a mode, not an occupation. [...] They live and inspire it but they do not write it” (qtd. in Parker 6). One need only call to mind *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain* (1779) painted by Richard Samuel in which notable female poets Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Carter, Anna Barbauld, and Hannah More along with other distinguished women writers and intellectuals are portrayed as muses.⁷ In Urusova’s

⁷ On the discussion of the Samuel’s painting, see Eger, Elizabeth. “Representing Culture: ‘The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain’ (1779).” *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700-1830*, Cambridge UP, 2001, pp. 104–32. However, Eger maintains that in the case of the painting, the portrayal of real women as muses “can be seen as an assertion of the former’s artistic endeavour rather than as a portrayal of women as the passive enablers of art” (109).

poem the desire for applauding enlightened Russia is immediately followed up with the celebration of the first Russian women poets:

И чтобы окружать священных Муз престол,
То начал воспевать у нас и женский пол: (152)

The female sex has also begun to sing,
That women might surround the sacred Muses' throne. (153)

Such juxtaposition may be interpreted allegorically—that Urusova intended it as a plea for women in Urusova's milieu. She appealed to her female readers to take the pen and engage in the creation of a like-minded community among them.⁸

From her correspondence, we know that Urusova was sympathetic to the cause of women's writing and poetry. For example, in July of 1786 she writes to Ekaterina Derzhavin, the wife of a famous and respectable poet, Gavril Derzhavin:

У вас, видно, есть стихотворения, сочинение которых делает честь
нашему полу: мне весьма приятно было читать то прекрасное
стихотворение, которое вы мне сообщили; желаю, чтобы знакомство
с музами усугублялось в нашем поле. Несмотря на то, что я разорвала
мой союз с музами, желаю, чтобы другие устанавливали с ними связь; а
мне остается только радоваться и восхищаться творениями
парнасских сестр моих. (qtd. in Kochetkova 97)⁹

You evidently have poems, the composition of which does honor to our
sex: I was very pleased to read that beautiful poem which you presented to
me; I wish that the acquaintance with the Muses may be intensified in our

⁸ Perhaps, Urusova addressed contemporary women authors of whom historians are not yet aware.

⁹ Translations quoted in Kochetkova are my own.

field.¹⁰ Though I have ended my alliance with the Muses, I wish others would establish a connection with them; and I have only to rejoice and admire the works of my Parnassian sisters.

Similarly to the way she refers to women writers as her “Parnassus sisters” in her letter, her invocation of the muse in the *Heroides* from the very onset is defined as the plural, the Muses. This mere alteration from the singular to the plural produces a communal effect. The muses as abstract deities become conflated and combined with real women authors and readers, the contemporaries of Urusova forming a kind of sisterly community in art. The muses in the *Heroides*, while granting Urusova the ability to sing, also constitute a metaphor for an imagined literary community.

While Urusova, appealing to the muses, asks support for her timid voice, the characters of her *Heroides* should have served as an example and inspiration to other women. Since women authors risked being seen as immodest, Urusova portrays precisely the women exhibiting behavior that, as Rosslyn attests (2000, 426), would be deemed unfeminine in eighteenth-century Russia, thereby inspiring her female readers to acts transcending the typical feminine behavioral models. As Diana Greene observes, there is a difference between the addressee in women’s and men’s poetry. When a male poet directs his poems to a woman, the implied reader is nevertheless a male, as opposed to the ones produced by women where “the ‘you’ of a poem” (47) is very often female.

¹⁰ The words “в нашем поле” rendered here as “in our field” may also be translated as “in our sex,” as evidenced by the usage in, for example, Hoffmanowa, Klementyna. *Pamiat’ dobroj materi, ili, Poslednie eia sovety docheri svoei* [*The Memory of the Kind Mother, or Her Last Advice to Her Daughter*]. V tipografii Imperatorskago Vospitatel’nago Doma, 1827, 190.

Urusova dispenses with the Sentimental view that a woman is a captive of her passions and incapable of restraining strong emotions. She repeatedly portrays heroines such as Zeida, who despite Leandr's marital infidelity encourages herself:

Иль властвовать собой уже я не умею?

Зеида! рвение сердечно удержи,

Взаимную ему холодность покажи. (166)

Am I no longer able to control myself?

Zeida! Restrain your heart's jealousy.

Show him coldness in return for his own." (167)

Fedima, inspired by the tragedy of the poet Aleksei Rzhevskii, *The False Smerdis* (1769) (Ewington, 476n87), is forced to marry the tyrant Smerdis in order to save the life of her father and beloved, Darius. In response to Darius' pleas to turn vengeance on her husband Fedima exclaims:

И что поднесь тебя, О Дарий! я люблю;

Но должность брачную я свято соблюдаю;

Против супруга я востати не дерзаю,

И мщенья на него никак не обращаю; (182)

And that to this day, O Darius, I love you!

But I sacredly observe my matrimonial duty.

I dare not rise against my husband

And will in no way make vengeance on him. (183)

Even after the death of Smerdis, in which she was not involved, she rejects a marriage proposal from Darius and instead mourns the death of her lawful husband (Ewington

477). As Andrew Kahn rightly suggests, “while the male speakers of elegy are paralyzed by love, women in this collection rise above their moments of hysteria to titanic acts of bravery” (340–41). This serves as a further encouragement, a call for women to take up the pen. Through the heroine of the closing poem, Kliada, as Catriona Kelly points out, Urusova directly addresses the female reader and sets the precedent for poetry as an act of communication between women (30).

Urusova does not borrow episodes directly from Ovid. Instead, her poems feature women from contemporary neoclassical plays. Catriona Kelly sees this as a gesture of independence (30), but it also seems to be caused by a lack of significant role models on which she could confidently rely. Thus, to enhance the sense of authenticity, she resorts to contemporary fictional heroines (maneuvering between her writing task and the need for social propriety with such an intimate subject).

Nevertheless, her choice of themes was restricted because due to the gendered division of the spheres of life into the public, male-dominated and the private, domestic which was considered naturally female, women’s education entailed instilling moral and virtuous behavior, so that “Any women with access to the public world were expected to transfer naturalness and honesty – key virtues in Sentimentalist discourse – from the home into the public sphere” (Stohler 28). As a consequence, women’s oeuvre, too, should naturally have contributed to the development of virtue and should not have overstepped the bounds of propriety and modesty.

The Russian hierarchy of poetic genres, borrowed from the French neoclassicism, regarded ode, tragedy, and epic as the highest level of poetic production and implicitly instructed women to remain in the range of lyric middle genres. Urusova was the only

female poet presenting her work as epic or tragic (Ewington 11-12). Even so, the *Heroides* appeared in print anonymously, and she accompanied her earlier epic poem *Polion, or The Misanthrope Enlightened* (1774) with the words:

Никогда бы не отважилась я издать в свет моего творения, ежели бы
руководство, советы и некоторые поправки одного известного в
России сочинителя мне к тому не вспомоществовали. (qtd. in
Kochetkova 95)¹¹

I would never have dared to publish this work of mine, if I had not had the
guidance, advice, and some corrections of a certain famous Russian poet
assisting me in this.

Therefore, referring to the emergence of women poets in Russia in the proem to the *Heroides*, Urusova does not depart from those creative expectations and writes:

Они ко нежностям во песнях прибегают,
И добродетелям венцы приготавлиют.
С приятностью они веселости поют,
И действие страстей почувствовать дают. (152)

Their songs turn to tenderness
And prepare crowns for virtue.
They sing pleasantly of merriment
And allow us to feel the power of passion. (153)

It is this “power of passion” that is the theme of her *Heroides*. Ursula Stohler explains that the exclusion of women from the public domain, besides the Sentimentalist

¹¹ Kochetkova notes that it was likely Mikhail Kheraskov (Russian poet and playwright, 1733-1807).

ideology of separate spheres, was “based on a fear of the female element, which [was] thought to bring disorder to the republican brotherhood” (43). Yet Urusova repeatedly depicts conflicts of love and duty in which women voluntarily and consciously make the right choice and prove themselves to be in control of their emotions and passions. For example, Kliada, the heroine of the last poem says, “I preserve my passion in my heart but I submit to duty” (269) (Я в сердце страсть храню; но долгу покоряюсь). Urusova shows that women’s passionate nature does not prove to be a destructive force for society, but rather has a civilizing influence.

Therefore, when Urusova writes that women enable us to feel the power of passions, she continues a theme already raised in *Polion* about the defense of women’s inherent worth and the proper place of women’s poetry in Russian society. Judith Vowles offers a convincing argument about Urusova’s treatment of gender in *Polion* (45). Specifically, “Urusova rejects the view of Novikov [a Russian writer, critic, publisher, and public figure of the eighteenth century (1744-1818)] and others that feminine society and conversation corrupts,” writes Vowles, “and she asserts that without love and without women there can be no civilization and no enlightenment” (45).

As part of *Polion*’s false learning, he spends time in a dark forest, “the wild wood of barbarism and ignorance, representing Russian culture in the days untouched by the civilizing presence of women and love. Neither Nature nor Truth finds a home in this barren land [...] where ‘Pomona had no sway’” (46), states Vowles. This description is similar to the way Russia is “mired in darkness” (153) in the proem to the *Heroides* until Catherine the Great welcomes the advent of arts and sciences. Pomona in *Polion* is not only the Roman goddess of love and marriage, as Vowles comments, but is, of course, an

allusion to Catherine herself. In a later poem of Urusova's, "Song of the Steppe," she depicts an island by the banks of the Neva:

Он рощей, как стеною,
От бурей огражден.
В сем острове Помона
Себе воздвигла трон; (286)
It is protected from storms
By a grove, as by a wall.
On that island Pomona
Has erected her throne." (287)

Amanda Ewington notes that Pomona had a sacred grove outside of Rome which corresponded to the image of Saint Petersburg, while Pomona was to represent the Empress herself (480n120).

Thus, *Heroides* just as much as *Polion* supports "female-centered mixed-gender sociability" (qtd. in Levitt 366), and her address in the opening to them encapsulates a message to her readers to turn to writing as well, because according to Urusova it is only women who can write about the power of passions since, in the words of her heroine Kliada:

Вам нежныя сердца природа даровала,
И вам сама любовь законы подавала. (262)
Nature granted [them] tender hearts
And love itself gave [them] its laws." (263)

Andrew Kahn also notes this: he supports the idea that Urusova considers women writers to be in an exclusive position regarding the effect of the passions by virtue of their gender (340).

Urusova even mentions the appearance of prominent female poets in Russia:

В России видимы, Сапфоны, де ла Сюзы,

За ними я стремлюсь:...(152)

In Russia we see Sapphos and de la Suzes.

I rush after them..." (153)

She alludes to the formation of a distinctively Russian tradition of women's poetry. Nevertheless, what is important is that despite the evident lack of female literary predecessors in Russia, Urusova chooses still to identify with the female poets from within the Russian literary tradition, claiming that there is an emergence of women poets in Russia whose art is as great as the one of Sappho (whom Sumarokov ranked second after Homer) and the Comtesse de La Suze the French poet of the 17th century whose name, as Amanda Ewington states, became an epithet for women writers in Russia at the time (476n82). Such a statement in a society where literary life among women was only nascent, of which only a few isolated poems had been printed, clearly should have served as an invitation to the artistic endeavor.¹²

Overall, the cycle of poems *Heroides Dedicated to the Muses* by Princess

Ekaterina Urusova is not only a valuable contribution to Enlightenment-era social and

¹² Catriona Kelly notes one of the main issues in reconstructing the first Russian women writers is the fact that a lot of the material was never published, "it was read aloud, or circulated in letters or manuscript copies, or was noted in albums" (42). For more information, see Kelly, Catriona. "Sappho, Corinna, and Niobe: Genres and Personae in Russian Women's Writing, 1760–1820." *A History of Women's Writing in Russia*, edited by Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M. Gheith, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

cultural discourse; it presents the most powerful statement in eighteenth-century Russia in defense of women's right to authorship. Through a series of poems addressing the female side of the conflict between love and duty, and especially in the preface to them, Urusova championed the view that it is female involvement in contemporary cultural life that will advance Russia to greater social and cultural achievements.

Though an exception for eighteenth-century Russia, the creation of such a literary succession is not a singular example in the literature of the time. Elizabeth Eger, describing the liberal arts in England in the eighteenth century, points out that "Women frequently made links between their mythical and real historical predecessors." and provides an example of Mary Hays, who combined women "as diverse as Abassa, Catharine Macaulay, Sappho and Zenobia" in her *Dictionary of Female Biography* (1803) (111). The construction of such a genealogy is especially important in women's work because, as Sarah Parker notes, this identification allows women to strengthen their position as creators, as opposed to the silent inspiring muse (7).

In 1774, just three years before Urusova's *Heroides*, Mary Scott published *The Female Advocate; a Poem Occasioned by Reading Mr. Duncombe's Femiinead*.¹³ Scott constructs a national genealogy of female creativity and scholarship, praising fifty women from the Renaissance to her contemporaries, mostly of the aristocratic and middle class.

Scott footnotes each mentioned character in which she provides a brief biography, her main accomplishments, sometimes a bibliography, and references to other texts. This makes Scott's work multi-dimensional, as she appears not only to be a poet, but also an

¹³ It was inspired, as the title indicates, by John Duncombe's *The Femiinead* (1754).

effective researcher, editor, and political activist. Moira Ferguson points out that “one corollary of Scott’s emphasis on female scholarship is her self-representation not only as a poet, but as a scholar” (33). She describes her ambition and choice of subject:

But say what theme shall sportive Fancy chuse,
Since nature’s charms no more delight the Muse?
What theme! and can it then a doubt remain
What theme demands a tributary strain,
Whilst Lordly Man asserts his right divine,
Alone to bow at wisdom’s sacred shrine;
With tyrant’s sway would keep the female mind
In error’s cheerless dark abyss confin’d? (ll. 17-24)

Although Scott describes her muse as “sportive,” i.e., playful and light-hearted, she sees the purpose of her oeuvre as dutiful. The choice of the subject comes naturally to her, as she aspires to describe “What bright daughters Britain once could boast, / What daughters now adorn her happy coast” (lines 25-26). England’s talented and educated women are the pride of their nation, the supreme naval power (the reference to the coast reinforces the sense of a self-sufficient, strong country, standing apart from continental rival countries, especially France).

Men, according to Scott, actively seek to exclude women from the scientific and literary arenas by confining them to the “dark abysses,” reminiscent of Urusova's descriptions of how Russia was “mired in darkness” before the Enlightenment (line 4). However, while Urusova describes women's entry into literature in a positive light, she presents her view as well as her writing personality entirely within a tradition largely

predetermined by men. As Marcus Levitt asserts, this very fact that this was a male tradition was not yet perceived by society as something problematic (Levitt 376-77). For Scott, male supremacy is tyrannical.

In her introduction to a 1984 reprint of *The Female Advocate*, Gae Holladay focuses on two specific themes: virtue and learning (viii). However, I think that it is important to also give special attention to a third: power. The epigraph Scott chooses, with the following lines reflecting the images of power and conquest, is important:

Self-prais'd, and grasping at despotic pow'r.
Man looks on slav'ry as the female dow'r,
To nature's boon ascribes what force has giv'n,
And usurpation deems the gift of Heav'n.

According to Scott, beneath the mask of faith, there is a deliberate effort to discourage female enlightenment. Thus, by defending it, women risk being regarded as sacrilegious.

Images of power reappear near the end of the poem after Scott finishes her tributes to educated literary women: "Man sits high on Learning's awful throne, / Thinks the fair realms of knowledge his alone" (lines 337-338). These "fair realms of knowledge" seem unattainable to women. Thus, in the very next line, Scott urges, "But you, ye fair, his Salic Law disclaim" (line 339). It appears that Scott changes her angle and refers to women in general, hence, the consecutive "thou" in the poem accompanying the tribute to each of her heroines changes here to the plural "ye." These women, the poet writes, "disclaim [Man's] Salic Law" referring, possibly, to the French legal system excluding women from rule (Hanley 2).

The Female Advocate has a circular structure, with the theme of power appearing at key points in the beginning and end of the poem. The issue of forceful struggle finds a happy resolution:

With joy ineffable the Muse surveys

The orient beams of more resplendent days:

As on she raptur'd looks to future years,

What a bright throng to Fancy's view appears! (lines 443-446)

Scott's muse sees these "beams" in the present; therefore, they may refer to the women of whom she writes. They are the symbol of the rising sun, not yet at its zenith, but its rays already brightening up the surrounding landscape. Thus, the "oriental beams" symbolize the beginning of a new era, a new world in which women are able to assume their rightful place.

In allocating to women their places within this utopian vision, Scott depicts how "With matchless Newton now one soars on high, / [...] Another now, of curious mind, reveals / What treasures in her bowels Earth conceals" (lines 451-454). The image of a woman soaring in the sky on par with "matchless Newton" may seem oxymoronic at first glance, but it gives the impression that female involvement in all fields of science will reach unprecedented heights and that women will be able to match for men in achievement. Scott does not confine herself to the stereotype that women must associate with the sphere of the sublime, and boldly juxtaposes the heavenly and terrestrial spheres in the following lines, the high and the low. Nevertheless, the image of the "bowels" of

the earth, a part of the body related to childbirth, and in some way sacred and intimate, also creates the impression of a specifically female perspective.¹⁴

Ultimately, one common trait between the two poets is the idea of nation-building and female cultural involvement. In Urusova's poem the idea that women are able to contribute to the cultural progress of a nation is only nascent. Scott expresses a more developed sentiment and advocates for the proper recognition of accomplishments of her female contemporaries and their predecessors. Unlike Urusova, whose literary genealogy draws on an international and fictional dimension due to the absence of role models in Russia, Scott builds her continuum within the national tradition. Urusova, in *Heroides*, defends female identity by gently revealing it in a different light. The women characters in her work exhibit courage, moral strength, a keen sense of duty, and emotional self-control. Although she sought to present her work as tragic or epic, Urusova chose to introduce her ideas in heroides, a genre associated with the feminine oeuvre. Mary Scott, on the other hand, was able to gather half a hundred examples of prominent women. Of the fifty poets featured, sixteen belonged to the nobility, twelve were associated with the influential Bluestocking literary society, one was a working-class poet, while the rest were middle-class. While "Englishwomen began to chronicle the accomplishment of their predecessors as part of a gendering of Hanoverian nationalism; they were intent on cultural separation from France, Spain, and Italy" (Ferguson 29); in Russia, by contrast, there was an increasing self-awareness as part of Europe and its cultural heritage of antiquity. As evidenced by the choice of notable names in the proem to *Heroides*, Russia

¹⁴ According to Oxford English Dictionary, in the eighteenth century, the word "bowels" could refer to the womb or any internal organ, including the brain ("Bowel, n.1")

now had “Racines and Pindars,” (153) and among women “Sapphos and de la Suzes” (153).

Similarly, Scott argues much more boldly about the inequalities and limitations of women’s education by drawing together images of violence and power. However, she frames her argument within the established English tradition of tributes to notable women, unlike Urusova, the only known woman in eighteenth-century Russia who dared to produce such a poetic statement.

CHAPTER 2

ADDRESSING THE READERS: ALEKSANDRA MURZINA AND JANET LITTLE

The focus of this chapter is Aleksandra Murzina's "To My Readers" (1799) juxtaposed with Janet Little's "To the Public" (1792). Both of these works are addresses to their readers, opening their respective collections of poems. A comparative analysis demonstrates that, despite the poets' different socio-economic position and relation to the target audience, they share a feeling of insecurity regarding their engagement with versification, and though Murzina and Little adopt different defensive strategies, they both strive to change the biased attitude of critics.

Aleksandra Murzina continued the theme of fighting prejudice against the female sex. She challenged the rejection of women's right to intellectual achievements in her poem "To My Readers" ("K chitateliam") which came out in the only published collection of her works *The Unfolding Rose or Works in Prose and Verse* (Raspuskaiushchiasia roza ili Raznye sochineniia v proze i stikhakh, 1799). "To My Readers" is positioned after the prose sketches and opens the versified part of the collection. Although the collection, itself, epitomizes rather Sentimental literary values, "To My Readers" directly addresses the prejudice and injustices that women poets and writers faced at the turn of the nineteenth century in Russia.

As Ursula Stohler points out, Sentimental ethics drove women out of the public sphere and, consequently, out of politics (90). They could not write political and

philosophical pamphlets like Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792). As a result, as Stohler argues, if Russian women wanted to raise their voices against social injustice, some women used the venue available, poetry. However, even then a direct concern was not considered appropriate, so they often had to incorporate their messages into collections of idyllic poems and of literary works about friendship and the springtime, both of which were believed to be suitable for women (90–1).

Murzina had to stipulate that she did not aspire to public fame in order to avoid any accusations of undue ambition and vanity; rather, in “To My Readers” she explains that she took the pen to become more virtuous through educational activity:

Писать я для того
Стихами начинала,
Веселья моего
Предметом их считала,
Чтоб скуки избежать,
Что праздность порождает;
Тщеславие жь питать
Душа моя не знает. (406)

I began to write poetry
For this reason:
I found it an object of amusement;
A way to avoid a boredom
That breeds idleness.

My soul cares nothing
For flattered vanity. (407)

She remarks that women are subject to more scrupulous examination from society than men and counteracts the Sentimental conventions which placed the female figure as the embodiment of what Murzina calls “tenderheartedness” (line 28):

Но естли в их умы,
В их нравы вникнуть строже;
То, в чем коль слабы мы,
И в них во всем всё то же. (406)

But if we are to consider their minds,
Then, let's view more severely their morals too;
For as weak as we may be,
The very same is true of them. (409)

However, “both idealization and denigration are forms of sexism, limiting the roles women are allowed to play and ignoring their reality as unique individuals” (Marsh 8). Therefore, she refuses to idealize either men or women. Instead, she approaches her characterizations from a more universal, human position. She strives towards a more realistic psychological depiction of both women and men, arguing that such qualities as vanity and shallowness are inherent to both sexes. As Ursula Stohler notes, she implies the “unconditional value of all human beings” (9) created equally gifted by God. This invocation of the Divine is significant, as Diana Greene suggests that there was much apprehension among Russian women poets that caused them to blame the divine for the injustice they faced. Therefore, even as late as in the second half of the nineteenth-

century, women authors avoided challenging divine authority (2003, 55). However, Murzina turns the situation around and questions men's dominance by invoking divine authority:

Ужель премудрый Бог
Имел в своем совете,
Чтобы мужчина мог
Один судить о свете? (410)
Did our most wise God truly
Have in his counsel
That man alone could
Opine upon the world? (411)

In fact, she invokes divine authority several times, each time emphasizing the wisdom of the Creator who: "treats the human race / Equally in all his gifts" (Ewington 413). Therefore, she implicitly sends the message that prejudice against women on the basis of their sex challenges the very order of life.

However, she goes beyond that by invoking another authority, a political one:

Что в женщинах ум есть,
Сия небес награда;
Пример могу привести:
Се Росская Паллада! (410)
[W]omen too have a mind;
That heavenly reward.
I shall bring forth an example:

Behold the Russian Palladium! (411)

She refers to the Empress Catherine the Great who died three years before the poem was published. Vera Proskurina explains that in the eighteenth century, literature had a tremendous influence on the political realm because it created images, symbols, metaphors, and allegories that shaped perceptions of the monarch (12). Despite the fact that the eighteenth century is considered the era of empresses in Russia, Catherine the Great was the first and only female ruler who addressed women's education and upbringing and was recognized as a patroness of liberal arts (Ivleva 31). However, much like preceding female monarchs, Catherine highlighted her image as an Amazon warrior, seeking praise for "masculine" aspects of her personality (Proskurina 22). Because of this, their poems ought not be read with Catherine in mind, but rather focusing on the philosophical and aesthetic movements that coincided with her reign (Ewington 9).

Murzina emphasizes the equality of the sexes through the image of the empress. Perhaps, the reference to a political authority in the same context with the Heavenly Father was supposed to provide double strength to her argument. She employs the figure of Catherine the Great not only to legitimize her work but also as a strong argument for the combination of reason and virtue in women, since no one would argue that the wise monarch Catherine was devoid of such qualities.

Murzina also emphasizes women's rights to education:

Приятность учения пленила душу мою; И истинные любители его
веселятся даже тем, когда на незрелые плоды его взирают. (406)

The pleasure of learning captivated my soul; and those who truly love
learning rejoice even when gazing upon its unripe fruits. (407)

However, even though it seems that she follows the feminine writing conventions and states her verses should not be judged harshly because of her lack of education and the ineptitude of a woman's hand, through her work, she undermines the same preconceived notions and summons the divine authority and political power to be her witnesses and defenders in the struggle for justice.

In Russia, Murzina makes an argument for women's right to education, creativity, and unbiased judgment, yet, at the same time, she asserts that she is willing to accept fair criticism:

Я разсудила, что лучше делать и отдать что-нибудь пересудам
критики, нежели проводить время в совершенной праздности. Первая
заставляет примечать свои недостатки; Последняя же и подумать о
них не велит. (406)

I reasoned that it was better to do something and submit it to the critics' judgment than to pass the time in complete idleness. The former forces us to note our deficiencies; the latter does not permit us even to consider them (407).

Janet Little (1759-1813), a working-class Scottish poet, exhibits a somewhat different attitude in "To the Public," one of two works opening her volume of poems *The Poetical Works of Janet Little, The Scotch Milkmaid* (1792). Little expresses her trepidation about criticism:

From the dull confines of a country shade,
A rustic damsel issues forth her lays;
There she, in secret, sought the Muse's aid,

But now, aspiring, hopes to gain the bays.

“Vain are her hopes,” the snarling critic cries;

“Rude and imperfect is her rural song.”

But she on public candour firm relies,

And humbly begs they’ll pardon what is wrong. (lines 1-6)

Just as Stohler noted, Russian women poets had to “dilute” their strong statements against patriarchy with more conventional, inoffensive pieces (90-1), similarly Janet Little’s collection constitutes a “balance” of subversive and more conservative poems (Meehan 44). This poem is an example of such a carefully constructed balance.

As is evident from the first lines, in “To the Public” she presents herself as a working-class Scottish poet, a “rustic damsel” (line 2) expressing apprehension toward the possible reception of her verses. Donna Landry writes that the idea that “Scottish critics were rigorous, ruthless, and much to be feared is an assumption shared by poets as different as Burns and Byron” (223). This was partially due to Scottish education and partially because of the ambiguous character of Edinburgh “as national capital and provincial cultural center – seeing itself as a rival to London, yet refusing rivalry” (ibid.). For this reason, Little writes “To the Public” in standard English instead of weaving together Scots and standard English as, for example, she does in “Given to a Lady Who Asked Me to Write a Poem.” Thus, she asserts that even though she is a “rustic damsel” whose vernacular, supposedly, renders her and poetry inadequate and crude, she, in fact, writes in the language of the English literary establishment.

Moreover, her choice of high status, blank verse, the poetic form of Shakespeare and Milton, for this opening poem makes a strong statement about her poetic skill and

knowledge and confronts notions of natural genius imposed on laboring-class poets. Opting for a five-beat meter instead of the four-beat one, she demonstrates her position at the top of the hierarchy of rhythmic patterns and rhyme schemes.¹⁵ Thus, where Murzina fights for fair play on the merits of her sex, Little's situation becomes complicated by such factors as nationality and economical status.

Nevertheless, unlike Murzina, she is not afraid to declare, modestly, an explicit search for fame:

Upon your voice depends her share of fame,
With beating breast her lines abroad are sent:
Of praise she'll no luxuriant portion claim;
Give but a little, and she'll rest content. (lines 13-6)

However, Murzina wrote about her attitude toward fame: "My soul cares nothing / For flattered vanity" (407). From the very beginning of Westernization in Russia, women's education was designed to foster morality, obedience to elders, and modesty. Such was the famous pedagogical work of Peter the Great's time, *The Honorable Mirror of Youth* (*Iunosti chestnoe zertsalo*, 1717) (Kelly ctd. in Barker and Gheith 40). The further promotion of women's education initiated by Catherine II tied women's education to her family role and was intended as an avenue to the development of family, social and civic spheres (Nash 301). Thus, eighteenth-century Russia developed a discourse on women's responsibilities, but not their rights (Kelly ctd. in Barker and Gheith 43).

¹⁵ On the status of blank verse in the eighteenth-century English poetry see Steedman, Carolyn. "Poetical Maids and Cooks Who Wrote." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 2005, pp. 1-27.

Additionally, during this time Russian women authors were almost exclusively members of the social elite due to their limited access to literacy and education. In contrast, in Britain, those who could read, write, and print represented a diverse group, ranging from the gentry to the working classes. Jan Fergus, speculating on the breadth and reading habits of provincial servants in the 18th century, writes that “The classic motives for reading in the period were delight and instruction, and servants’ choices certainly indicate both intellectual curiosity and a desire for self-improvement” (225); Fergus also provides a preliminary observation about a “striking similarity between servants’ choices and those of their masters” (ibid.).

However, it is important to bear in mind a distinctive perspective of a person, especially a woman, related to reading. According to Naomi Tadmor “the reading woman tends to be associated with leisure, if not with boredom and idleness” (164). For a working-class woman, reading meant, first and foremost, having spare time, a fact which might not be seen to be in her favor, at all. Such constant stipulation, self-justification, and choice of religious themes reflect a similarity between Russian women authors and laboring-class British women.

William J. Christmas identifies three principles that played a key role in the self-representation of laboring-class poets, the “‘triumvirate of values’ - namely ‘honesty, industry, and piety’” (qtd. in Keegan 164). They could equally easily be applied to Murzina. For example, Murzina’s preface to the poem “To My Readers” indicates that she published it because her life, as is the case with laboring poets, could serve as a didactic expression of those values. Industry signified that “laboring-class people occupied their time with activities deemed productive, not with poetic activity” (Keegan

164). In much the same way Murzina persistently emphasizes reading and writing with the goal, as she herself says, “to elevate spiritual faculties and correct depravity” (407). Working-class poets, as Bridget Keegan explains, also often preferred religious themes as their subject matter to ward off any potential accusations of overstepping their social station (163).

Another area that laboring-class women poets in Britain and Russian women poets of nobility have in common is their dependence on literary patrons. Russian women authors were frequently born into literary families which allowed them the necessary access to journals in which they could publish (Tyulenev 84). Much is unknown about Murzina’s biography, but this was the case with the two other poets included in this study, Ekaterina Urusova and Anna Bunina (Kochetkova 94-5, Rosslyn, 1996, 231). In Britain, however, the eighteenth-century system of patronage “of the traditional patron-client kind” was gradually declining during the century giving way to “the more modest and occasional patronage of the dedication and subscription list sponsors” (Rizzo 241). However, this traditional relationship was still in effect between patrons and working-class poets (*ibid.*).¹⁶ Dependence on patronage created a difficult situation for women in Russia and working-class poets, regardless of their sex, in Britain, because both were expected not to overstep their social station in order to protect their genius from corrupt influence.¹⁷

¹⁶ Catriona Kelly observes that there were examples in eighteenth-century Russia of women being patrons too, as exemplified by a eulogy by Fedor Buslaev to his patron Baroness Mariia Iakovlevna Stroganova published in 1734 (39-40).

¹⁷ Learning and social advancement with regards to laboring-class British poets, and education in terms of Russian women authors (since most of them were already from the nobility). For the discussion of patron-client relationship in Britain, see Rizzo, Betty. “The Patron as Poet Maker: The Politics of Benefaction.” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1991, pp. 241–66. Rosslyn addressed the issue with regard to the Russian writing, see Rosslyn, Wendy. “Anna Bunina’s ‘Unchaste Relationship with the

Thus, although Murzina's collection of poems conforms to the ideals of the Sentimentalist era (Shohler, 90-1), its opening poem attacks one of that era's fundamental beliefs regarding the dismissal of women's intellectual potential and accomplishments, and, overall, marks a step forward in the development of feminist criticism in Russia. Unlike Urusova, Murzina is not satisfied with simply the civilizing role of women; instead, she advocates for women's education, critical inquiry, rationality, and reason. In support of her argument, she appeals to the political and religious authorities but also is appeals to piety in defense of her right to be an author. Janet Little's poem is less vehement; her statement comes rather in the choice of a language and poetic meter. However, where Little finds that biased criticism due to her economic status and national origin prevents fair judgement of her verses, Murzina asks the critics for fair play only on account of her sex. Murzina, of course, faced a completely different challenge, since she wrote for an audience with which she shared the same language and culture; Little, instead, faced English cultural dominance, yet we can see that she employs the same "triumvirate of values," that is, "honesty, industry, and piety" in her self-representation that William J. Christmas ascribed to working-class poets.

Muses': Patronage, the Market and the Woman Writer in Early Nineteenth-Century Russia." *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 74, no. 2, 1996, pp. 223-42. JSTOR.

CHAPTER 3

PROFESSIONAL POETS: ANNA BUNINA AND MARY JULIA YOUNG

This chapter compares the presentation of a woman poet's identity by two professional poets, Anna Bunina and Mary Julia Young. Both of them engage with the subject of poetic genres and issues of fame and ambition. However, the struggle reflected in Bunina's work demonstrates the dilemma women authors faced when attempting to merge the positions of a professional poet and a woman poet (or a *poetess*), seemingly irreconcilable at the time, whereas Young's situation, apart from her sex, is further complicated by competition in the literary marketplace.

In 1809, Anna Bunina (1774-1829) published her first book of poems titled *The Inexperienced Muse* (*Neopytnaia muza*). Rosslyn notes that the title not only appeals to the traditional notion of women as objects inspiring male creators, but also extends it to a new understanding of women as artists (100-1). By calling her muse inexperienced, Bunina invokes the conventional *topos* of modesty: "if inexperience could produce poetry, it must be poetry which did not demand reading, learning, technique and artistry" (*ibid.*). In the poem "My Portrait Drawn at Leisure During Autumn Gales for Friends" ("Moi portret, spisannyi na dosuge v osennie vetry dlia priiatelei") Bunina creates a representation of the female poet wrestling with the issue of conflicting identity, that of a

woman and as a poetic creator.¹⁸ This work offers not a physical self-portrait; rather, it is a reflection of the inner psychological tension faced by a woman poet embodying two contradictory voices, one of ambition and the other of self-doubt.

The conflict appears at the outset when the protagonist, forced to stay at home on a windy autumn day, searches for a pastime and, reluctant to devote herself to needlework (a purely feminine activity), chooses to write poetry:

Пускай о кровлю дождь стучит, дробится

.....

С пером в руках того авось и не примечу” (73).

Let the rain pound and drum against the roof

.....

With a quill in hand maybe I will take no note”

Bunina exposes the gender-defined poetic conventions, demonstrating that a woman poet encounters obstacles and prejudice at every step, starting with the choice of the subject of a future work. She rejects the eclogue because, as she argues:

... к ней приятная нужна свирель [flute, pipe];

А их нигде здесь нет продажных” (73).

... it needs a pleasant svirel;

But there are none for sale here”

An eclogue, the genre portraying an isolated rural life, seems to be a natural choice here, yet the setting in which the speaker finds herself is the exact opposite of the idyllic

¹⁸ Title translated by Wendy Rosslyn. She is the only scholar to my knowledge who wrote about this poem. The quoted lines from “My portrait” will be my own translation. Bunina’s book of poems does not have line numbers, therefore I will refer to page numbers instead.

pastoral. Bunina’s protagonist lives in impoverished surroundings with bleak and wintry weather. The svirel as a folk instrument is a suitable choice for an eclogue, but Bunina assigns it the epithet *prodazhnyi* (“venal”) which has a dual meaning, that is, either intended for sale or susceptible to corrupt influence, violating one’s principles for money. After an eclogue, she supposedly decides to create a gory battle scene but immediately hesitates, as she remembers that she is unfit for the task:

Но как мне то воспеть, чего не знаю!...

Геройства нет в душе – и мщеньем не пылаю;

К тому ж кровавых битв смертельно я боюсь...” (73)

How shall I sing that which I do not know!...

There is nothing heroic in my soul – and I do not burn with vengeance;

Also, I am scared to death of gory battles...”

Bunina conveys a dilemma that a woman author was bound to face. It is difficult to depict a battle without ever having been exposed to it. Paula Backscheider notes that every woman poet has commented in one way or another on poetic genres and their cultural and gendered significance, specifically “in playful and parodic poems, [they have] taken stands that can only be described as revisionary, resisting, and even subverting” (18–19). Writing about lacking courage for combat and being unable to buy a “pleasant” tone for an eclogue, Bunina inverts key themes of those poetic genres, exposing their inherently gendered character. Finally, after a lengthy search, the speaker decides to turn to the muses for inspiration:

Я к музам обращаюсь – и лестию речей

Склоню – да чистаго потока Ипокрены

Дадут вкусить мне сладких вод.

Напившись их начну учить народ. (74)

I will address the muses – and with flattery

I will win them – and they will give me leave to taste

of the sweet waters of the clean stream of the Hippocrene.

Once I've downed them, I'll start to teach the people.

However, the last phrase leaves the impression of undue ambition, as if the author of these words believes in the ease and spontaneity of the versification of the poem. The linguistic contrast creates a mock-heroic feeling, an effect which, as Adeline Johns-Putra aptly noted, has a “tendency simultaneously to mock and to heroicise, to trivialise and to elevate” (69). Much as the mock-heroic effect elevates and ridicules at the same time, there are two aspects of a woman poet's personality. One aspect strives for ambition, and the other belittles itself. Rosslyn, for example, characterized the protagonist as follows: “a woman who presented herself as a poet has to cope with the fear that [she] might only be a poetess, an incompetent version of the masculine bard (1997, 119).¹⁹

The speaker attempts to examine her personality to find a proper theme for her poetry and recounts her pursuits of music, needlework, her illness, and the way she handles the criticism of those around her. Whether she argues, acknowledges her faults, or excuses herself, these occupations revolve around a theme of hastiness as opposed to meticulous work and patience, and all are essentially a reflection of her involvement with poetry. For example, embroidery lessons reveal the issue of the purity of style and its

¹⁹ Moira Ferguson maintains that Janet Little experienced an “internalized conflict” (1995, 163) too, as evidenced in the poem “On Reading Lady Mary Montague and Mrs Rowe's Letters” (1792). The poem juxtaposes “the pious Elizabeth Rowe with the outspoken Lady Mary [Montague]” (ibid.).

influence on taste. In illness, it becomes a question of individualism; when her servant approaches her with advice, she responds: “you are a person - and I am another” (79). When she lacks the patience to refine her poetic prowess, she justifies it with her alleged reputation as an amateur poet:

“К тому ж вы пишете, что б скуку сократить.”

О! без сомнения – лишь время бы убить,

А лира не моя эмблема.

И рада – рада, что нашла

Хоть малый повод к оправданию. (81)

“Besides, you write to cut short boredom.”

O! without a doubt – merely to kill time,

But the lyre is not my emblem.

And I am glad – glad that I found

At least slight grounds for my defense.

Bunina personally experienced the consequence of the so-called “feminization” of Russian literature when at the end of the eighteenth century the philosophy and writings of Nikolai Karamzin provided the theoretical groundwork for women’s newfound participation in literature.²⁰ Karamzin made use of gender in his quest for a new Russian literary language and literature and, as Lotman notes, “Ladies’ taste was declared the supreme arbiter of literature, and the educator of future generations of enlightened Russians was declared to be the educated woman” (qtd. in Rosenholm and Savkina 162).

²⁰ Judith Vowles writes that Vinogradov was the first scholar to use the term, followed by Uspenskii. See Vowles, Judith. “The ‘Feminization’ of Russian Literature: Women, Language, and Literature in Eighteenth-Century Russia.” *Women Writers in Russian Literature*, 1994, pp. 35–60.

As a result, journals of women's writing would accept and publish essentially everything sent to them. They were even "actively soliciting submissions from women while expecting their works to be weak; their assessment of actual works by women consisted largely of flattery (often misogynistic) rather than substantial criticism" (Hammarberg 195).

Bunina shows how devastating it can be for the oeuvre of a woman who succumbs to this image of an amateur author, when her protagonist, in response to a reviewer's criticism, declares:

Вы знаете, труды ведь веселых муз пугают;
Оне от них, как призрак, убегают (81).
You know, labors scare sportive muses;
They run away from them like a ghost"

It is as though the speaker suggests that if she were to devote her poetry to serious political, religious, and cultural issues, deemed undesirable for women poets, she would need to polish her poetic skills; but because women's oeuvre was supposed to be concerned only with frivolous matters, it did not require expertise, knowledge, and mastery.

A professional woman author, Mary Julia Young (fl. 1789-1808) expresses a very similar attitude in "An Ode to Fancy" (1795), the poem in which she explores the question of genre and the poet's right to freely choose her type of work. Young opens her poem with the line "Tell me, blyth Fancy, shall I chuse / A tragic subject for my muse?" (lines 1-2) after which she recounts literary themes such as love, melancholy, war, the

battle of man and the natural elements, the gothic, etc.²¹ She paints scenes filled with action, strong feelings, and suffering. These sketches are clichéd and exaggerated, as for example the description of a ship's crew caught in a violent storm:

Useless ov'r the surges sweep:
On the tempest's rapid wing,
Swift to the fatal rock the wrecks are born,
The rock! where never smil'd the verdant spring!
On its flinty side they dash,
Bulging with a fearful crash! (lines 41-6)

However, in the last stanza the poet's tone changes, as she claims, "No Fancy, no, she loves to sport, / In gay Thalia's comic court" (lines 101-2) and shifts the focus from her initial lines by asking, "Then tell me Fancy, *can* I chuse, / A tragic theme for such a muse?" (lines 115-16) [original emphasis]. Thalia, one of the nine muses, presided over comedy and, notably, idyllic poetry, a genre which featured "Jocund, easy, unconfi'd" (line 105) themes. At first, this seems to contradict the previous poetic scenes, as she appears to abide the Sentimental notions of femininity being an object of admiration, the inspiring one instead of the inspired. This last stanza may be a rhetorical device which Young uses to prove that such a "jocund" muse can tackle the "graces of the tragic song" (line 108) which "to a loftier muse belong" (line 107), after having effectively demonstrated her absolute capacity to do so. Therefore, "An Ode to Fancy" may refer to Young's assertion to be regarded as a serious author, even though woman poets' muse was supposed to be "nor skillful, nor sublime" (line 111).

²¹ Mary Julia Young's poems are quoted from Feldman, Paula R. *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology*. JHU Press, 2001.

Young's poem might also be an illustration of her personal struggles between her affinity for and the demands of the literary market. Such a situation was characteristic of all professional writers; however, being a woman writer always meant, in the words of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, to be "marked by the cultural attributes of woman, gender, sexuality, the feminine" (Rachel Blau Du Plessis qtd. in Backscheider 22). Therefore, in order to meet the ever-changing trends of the literary market, she had to reconcile not only with her aesthetic preferences but also with expectations of propriety for women's writing. Young engages with a variety of topics, at times defying anticipation, as she masterfully shows in "An Ode to Fancy." For example, she portrays the potentially idyllic landscape of "the woods impervious to the beams of day" (line 64) which, however, quickly turns into a vicious and gory crime scene, as the bandits ambush their victim and "ere their bleeding victim dies, / Rapacious share their lawless prize" (lines 71-2).

The theme of war, from her perspective, is not a glorious battle but is "the pride of manhood slain" (line 82). As her muse wanders over the battleground, she sees that "[e]xposed, neglected, the brave warrior lies" (line 83). This is an overtly female angle which becomes explicit when her muse "[w]ith pious hand, say, shall she close his eyes, / And wrap him decent in his martial vest" (lines 85-6). She compares the heat of the battle to the "whizzing ball" (line 75) and, notably, chooses the image of "Bellona's car" (line 73) (a Roman goddess of war) instead of Mars to guide her muse through the battle. However, the speaker's muse does not actually participate in the fighting, herself; her role is that of a passive observer who only becomes active once the battle is over and she "sing[s] a requiem ov'r the silent dead" (line 90). This attitude is different from, say,

Joseph Warton's "Ode to Fancy" which, as Lloyd asserts, Young rewrote (65). In Warton's poem published in 1746, the male poet, driven by the muse, finds himself in the midst of the battle and immediately assumes an active role in it.

In any case, as Nicky Lloyd observes, "Young's literary career demonstrates the interplay of numerous factors required to attain commercial success in a highly competitive marketplace, involving both a dynamic appropriation of literary trends and negotiation with publishers and booksellers" (65), her readership, and her own aesthetic and moral values.

While Young's protagonist ironically asks "Fancy" if she is able to choose an inappropriate theme, Bunina's heroine engages in self-censorship and suffers from the inner struggle of wishing to be more than the embodiment of the feminine sphere. Even nature becomes a reflection of this internal conflict:

Терпение во мне и есть – и нет –
Оно как солнечный сегодня свет,
То в ярких вдруг лучах прольется,
То мрачной тучей оборвется. (79)

There is and is not patience within me –
It is like the sunlight today,
Sometimes suddenly spilling in bright rays,
Sometimes cut off by a gloomy cloud.

Bunina's autumn scenery is not the conventional pastoral landscape in which the secluded poet becomes inspired by idyllic nature. The fickle autumn weather echoes the shifting, non-monolithic personality of the protagonist. This emotional self-conflict

continues until the very end, with the speaker reflecting on the subjective and objective value of her poetry:

Та чашка – тот стакан, который мне служил,

Не быв хорош – привычкой мил,

И без цены имеет цену.

Не только вещь, люблю ту стену,

Которая меня из давних лишь блюла

И мне защитой была,

Хотя она не из богатых.....

Люблю животных так; собачек и пернатых,

Которых я от юных дней

Сама рукой своей питала.....(85)

That cup – that glass which served me,

Though not great – dear from habit,

And has worth without price.

Not only things, I love that wall,

Which from the old ones was the only one watching over me

And was my protection,

Through it is not from the wealthy.....

I love animals; dogs and birds,

Which I from early days

Nurtured with my own hand.....

Her alter ego interrupts her, preventing her from concluding the catalogue of the things that are important for her. The cup, the glass, the wall, and the pets are all metaphors. Her domestic life, though modest, provides shelter from rain and snow, and the walls protect her from the autumn winds.²² Similarly, poetry provides a sense of security and salvation (hence the epigraph to *The Inexperienced Muse*, “The lyre saved me from drowning”). Thus, her works, birthed by her own pen, are as dear to her as the pets she “nurtured with her own hand.”

Bunina’s protagonist’s reservations about transcending the image of the *poetess* were warranted. Mary Julia Young provides two scenarios representative of a woman poet in “To a Friend, On His Desiring Me to Publish” (1798).

According to the first, the fate of the female writer may develop in much the same way as that of Icarus who, because of his vanity and delusional self-reliance, flew too close to the sun, which melted his wings and he fell down “to rise no more” (line 12). Young portrays a stark contrast between Apollo presiding over the poetic sphere and an image of a woman poet whose “treacherous plumage” (line 11) is compared to Icarus’s

²² Another professional English author, Mary Robinson (1757-1800) also resisted the notion of spontaneous and effortless versification; she, however, shifted her angle and focused on the abject existence of writers in general, not only women authors. For example, “The Poet’s Garret” (1800) she describes, as Bunina does, a poet’s destitute living condition with “the wind / Whistl[ing] thro’ broken panes” (qtd. in Feldman, Paula R. *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology*. JHU Press, 2001, lines 32-3). Same as Bunina, she does not aestheticize authorial poverty, however the difference is that while Bunina’s female protagonist accepts and finds solace in her condition, Robinson’s attitude seems denunciatory and advocating change. Her male “bard,” after finishing his day’s work, eats the little he can afford “[w]ith appetite voracious!” (line 40). At his table, there is only a “heap of salt is serv’d, Oh! — heav’nly treat” (line 45), Robinson sarcastically writes. Perhaps, the difference in attitude comes from the fact that for Robinson writing was “a real form of work undertaken out of economic necessity” (Airey 4-5). In her correspondence, the poet acknowledged, “[I]f I had a mountain hovel, with a certain and regular income, however small, I would bid farewell to scribbling—for ever” (qtd. in Airey 5). In contrast, for Bunina, her verses were an inner drive for self-expression, however tainted by the necessity for economic gain. She regretted the need of writing for monetary reward. Rosslyn provides an example from her letter with Shishkov (a Russian writer, literary critic and Bunina’s patron) in 1813, “My happiness would be uncloudable if I could write only for my own satisfaction and that of others and if my acquaintance with the Muses were pure and not connected with gain” (qtd. in Rosslyn, 1996, 230).

wings. The juxtaposition of an unsuccessful woman poet and Icarus is an interesting and complex one. It conflates the mythological male figure, traditionally associated with hubris and imprudent audacity, and ambition and the image of a woman as a bird that, perhaps, seeks an escape but is regarded to be “presumptuous” and “proud” (line 9) by the public. Young might be providing her readers with a different, more sympathetic view of Icarus that hints at the revision of traditional prejudiced view of women who write. The speaker poet describes her flight in Apollo’s domain as “flutter[ing]” (line 8) which points to extreme fragility of the social stance of many women poets.²³ The very choice of the image of the Sun god, a male deity professing two maxims: “Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess,” here demonstrates his rightful mastery of the sphere of the sublime; Icarus’s place is on earth, and he is not meant to join the ranks of divine creators. Should he violate the established order, his imminent destruction will follow.

Young also describes another, “more common” (line 13) fate of a female poet. When “Envy’s hiss, and Critic’s frown” direct their “gall-dipp’d pens” (lines 17-8) towards her, she “an unknown, untaught woman, / Expose[s] [herself] to dread Reviews, / To paragraphs in daily news” (lines 14-6). The reference to herself as being uneducated is apparently an ironic one. To illustrate the impression that such biased criticism creates, she draws a revealing picture:

[Of] printers, editors, and devils,

With a thousand other evils,

²³ Icarus being full of glory and pride, flew too close to the sun in an attempt to conquer a sphere that was not intended for his reach. This is very similar to the way Bunina describes another character of Greek mythology, Phaeton, in her mock epic *The Fall of Phaeton*. Phaeton insisted on driving the chariot that belonged to his father, Helios, despite warnings of his ineptitude, which leads to his eventual demise. *The Fall of Phaeton* is a metaphor for the fate that is likely to befall a woman poet deciding to transcend prescribed creative boundaries.

That change the high-rai's'd expectation

To disappointment and vexation,

And chase, abash'd, from public fame,

The artless Muse, the humble name? (lines 19-24)

Such is the fate of a woman poet who composes poetry “[t]o pass a cheerless hour away” (line 6) or “in the maze of fancy stray” (line 5) and decides to expose herself to public judgment. However, despite the apprehensions of criticism, Young’s (or her poet persona’s) concerns do not remain within private correspondence or diaries. In both “An Ode to Fancy” and “To a Friend,” she carries her personal misgivings to the level of public discourse by composing and publishing her poetry after the apparently ironic assertion of not doing so. Her cheeky tone and challenging attitude to the established genre conventions unite her with Bunina’s protagonist. However, Bunina portrays her persona as divided by two opposing points of view, or as Rosslyn put it, “the censorious and the libertarian, declining to confirm either as the more authentic” (1997, 123) because the quarrel between the two voices ends abruptly mid-sentence, thereby leaving the argument open and ongoing beyond the scope of the poem.

Both Bunina and Young explore the issue of poetic genres and themes and expose their inherently gendered nature and the issue of pretensions to fame that women poets were bound to face. Young’s protagonist surveys the genres appropriate for women and through the rhetorical question “shall I chuse” presents scenes of tragedy, man’s struggle with nature, war, etc., in order to ironically remark at the end that her muse’s songs are light-hearted and, ostensibly, meant only as a pastime. Both Young and Bunina suggest that the genre conventions appropriate for women (and, importantly, the genres that could

bring commercial success, since Young, like Bunina, depended financially on authorship) imply unsophisticated and unskillful poetry suitable merely as a remedy for boredom. They show that when women begin to appropriate a different poetic style, language, and poetic devices, they invariably subject themselves to “dread Reviews, / to paragraphs in daily news” (lines 15-16), as Young put it in “To a Friend, on His Desiring Me to Publish.” But where Young is confident of her right for a loftier subject and the conflict is meant to demonstrate the prejudiced attitude generated externally, Bunina’s poet persona is split with the never-ceasing internalized conflict of ambition and hesitation. Bunina, instead of situating her persona within one of the traditional female roles in Russian literature such a female friend, an obedient daughter, a pious soul, etc., (Ewington 18) depicts her protagonist as an artistic creator. Yet, this woman-poet persona reveals herself to be nurturing, caring, protective, and kind—all feminine and motherly characteristics. These two opposing voices merge in the personality of the woman author aspiring to breach the boundaries of traditional female discourse. At the same time, Bunina was an exception in the Russian tradition of women’s poetry of the early nineteenth century, attempting to live off of her writing at a time when even most male authors could not afford to do so. She was, perhaps, the first woman poet in Russia who dared in her work to humorously exploit poetic conventions, unlike Young, who, in the British tradition, was preceded by a number of women poets playfully and ironically engaging with the subject.²⁴

²⁴ See the discussion of Mary Masters in Backscheider, Paula R. “Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre.” Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007, pp. 4-5.

CHAPTER 4
THE DECEPTIVE MUSE: ANNA BUNINA AND ANNA
LAETITIA BARBAULD

Bunina's "Conversation Between Me and the Women" addresses the issue that being a woman-poet meant being imprisoned between the two poles of the masculine perception of women's modesty and women's desire to be represented. In order to express her criticism, Bunina jokingly claims that her poem was inspired by deceptive muses known to mix truth and lies. In this way, Bunina places herself in the role of a jester who, paradoxically, both undermines and enhances the proclaimed truth. Such reference to the muse as an unreliable poetic source unites Bunina's approach with Anna Laetitia Barbauld's poem "Washing Day." Both poets make political statements underneath a jocund mask.

Bunina continued to mock prevailing attitudes that women's only true subjects were, as Vowles characterized them, "love and the nuances of feeling" (67) and that a "delicate, 'feminine' language and style [was] suited to polite society and ladies' sensibility" (ibid.) in her later poem "Conversation Between Me and the Women" ("Razgovor mezhdru mnoiu i zhenschinami," 1812) published in the second volume of *The Inexperienced Muse*. This time, however, she focused on another issue a woman poet experienced, an expectation that she would speak for her own community.

The poem is structured as a dialogue between the speaker (a woman poet persona) and other women from her circle. They, who upon having learned that there is now a female poet among them, become excited and inquire about the subjects of her poetry. She gladly tells of singing about nature, to which they reply:

Эге! какая ахиня!

Да слова мы про нам не видим тут...

Что пользы песни нам такая принесут? (462)

Fie! What nonsense!

Why, we see there not a word about us...

What use to use are such songs?" (463)²⁵

The poet then tells them that she also writes about soldiers, lawgivers, physicists, chemists, and astronomers. However, her female contemporaries remain unsatisfied because she chooses to sing the praises of men; they believe that because she is a woman, herself, she should be the voice representing and glorifying her kind.

Bunina shows how women poets found themselves in a complicated position because, while male writers could comfortably portray themselves in opposition to the community, women were more likely to see themselves as part of it. This is why, when the speaker in "Conversation" tells women that she sings of men, they call her a traitor and say:

На что училась ты стихам?

Тебе, чтоб брать из своего все круга; (464)

²⁵ Quoted in Amanda Ewington's translation, which, as was mentioned, does not provide line numbers. See Ewington, Amanda. *Russian Women Poets of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*. Iter Incorporated, 2014.

Why did you learn poetry?

That you might spurn affairs of your own circle? (465)

They become a mirror image of men who presume that her poetry serves a socially sanctioned purpose, rather than being an expression of her thoughts and feelings. Her female readers remain unconcerned even when the protagonist explains that her poetry empowers her:

Рогами месяц в воду ставлю;

.....

Ловлю по розам мотыльков крылатых:

.....

Иль вдруг, коням раскинув гриву,

Велю посточный ветер перестигать,

До облак прах копытами взметать.

Рисую класами венчанну ниву, (461-62)

I place a crescent moon upon the water,

.....

I chase winged butterflies among the roses.

.....

Or suddenly, having spread the steeds' mane,

I bid him outpace the east wind,

To make dust fly up toward the heavens with his hooves.

I paint fields crowned by ears of grain (461-63)

She centers the entire creative endeavor around what she wishes to express. Being in control, unfettered and unconfined, allows her to build confidence:

Природы красотой
Глас робкий укрепляя мой,
Вдруг делаюсь смелея! – (462)
Strengthening my own timid voice
With nature’s beauty,
I’m suddenly emboldened.” (463)

The women, however, see her merely as an instrument, one who belongs to the community and is expected only to serve its purpose. It is significant that they refer to her as *stikhotvoritsa* (woman-verse-maker), rather than simply a *poët* denying her the right to self-expression. Diana Greene notes that women-poets of the time rarely referred to themselves as *poëtessa*; instead, it was mainly men reviewers who called them different feminized variations of the word “poet,” such as *poëtessa* (poetess), *sochinitel’nitsa* (authoress), *stikhotvoritsa* (woman-verse-maker), *pisatel’nitsa* (woman-writer), or even *zhenshchina-pisatel’nitsa* (woman woman-writer) (2008, 268–69). Given that it is likely that in Russia at the time, the feminized versions of the title “poet” indicated a lower literary status (267), it is possible that Bunina was signaling that her gender often prevented objective poetical judgments.

As far as she was concerned, her work, and that of all women, ought to speak for itself. The appreciation of poetry should depend entirely on the skill of the artist, and her sex ought not to enter the equation. This is why, when she translated Batteux’s poetics from French, she dedicated her work to her female contemporaries, stating that one

should not seek to avoid criticism fairly given or to disregard critiques of legitimate stylistic errors. Her sex did not entitle her to critical leniency from readers (Hammarberg 193).

Facts from Bunina's biography demonstrate her continuing aspiration to be regarded as a serious poet. She was a woman of nobility who after the death of her wealthy father chose not to take advantage of the support of her family and spent all of her inheritance on education, hoping to attain a career of a writer. As a consequence, she struggled financially throughout her life but, instead, achieved independence of her family and dedicated herself to writing (Rosslyn, 1996, 229–30). Striving to be recognized as a worthy poet based on her work's merit instead of her sex, Bunina focused her studies on the language, genres, and subjects that lay within her intellectual abilities to master competently (Rosslyn, 1997, 330). Although, as a result, she attained the highest professional station available to women, she was not able to gain complete autonomy and needed to maneuver between the literary market and patronage.

These maneuvers are apparent in the closing lines of the poem, as the speaker remarks, in response to accusations of inadequate representation of women:

Мущины, а не вы присутствуют в судах,
При авторских венках,
И слава авторска у них в руках;
А всякой сам к себе невольно ближе. (466)
'Tis men, not you, who preside among the judges.
For an author's laurels
And authorial glory are in their hands.

And it can't be helped – we are each dearest to ourselves. (467)

Scholars have noted that the last line conveys Bunina's critique of the inherently patriarchal society in which the only way women could hope to succeed in the long term would be to write about men and activities within their social realm (Rosenholm and Savkina 165).

Though this may be read as Bunina's necessary stipulation to protect herself, because she relied on the support of patrons (and, consequently, was assumed to treat them with public respect) and sales in the market in which a greater proportion of readers were men, I think she engages in another kind of double-speak, akin to the one seen in "My Portrait." It can also be read as Bunina's statement of affinity for men and their literary discourse and her opposition to the ladies whose only concern is fashion and frivolous matters. She satirizes not only their ignorance, but also their very unwillingness to overcome their lack of learning:²⁶

И что пропела ты в те годы?

Признаться Русскому не все мы учены;

А русские писанья мудрены;

Да, правда, нет на них теперь и моды. (460)

And what have you sung in those years?

Admittedly, we are not all schooled in Russian;

And Russian writings are strange.

Yes, in truth, they are not in fashion now. (461)

²⁶ This is similar to Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

The footnote to the poem provided by Bunina herself seems to support this interpretation.

It reads:

Да простится мне шутка сия из снисхождения к веселонравным
Музам, которыя любят мешать дело с бездельем, ложь с истиной, и
невинной резвостию увеселять беседы. (466)

May this joke of mine be excused out of condescension to the cheerful
Muses, who love to mix activity with idleness, lies with truth, and to
enliven conversation with innocent playfulness (467).

Originally, the invocation to the muse appears in Hesiod's *Theogony* where its role is to help the bard remember the stories of gods and heroes of the past, so he could properly recount them (Parker 3). By stipulating her verses with the muse as the untrustworthy wisdom-carrier, Bunina constitutes purposefully disguised narration veiled as a good-natured joke. Since the deceitfulness of the muse subverts the author's role as the creator of meanings, it leaves room for her readers (either men or women) to interpret it in a non-offensive manner.

Bunina's poem shows a woman poet caught between her "duty" to the community to serve as the mouthpiece of her female readers and the expectation foisted on her by men to conform to the gendered literary conventions of modesty, virtue, and obedience. Both sides deny a woman poet the right to self-expression. It is important to bear in mind that Bunina became a professional author at a time when, due to the influence of the cult of Sensibility, women's writing was treated ambiguously, appreciated for its sentimentality but looked down upon for its relative lack of refinement. She demonstrates that women readers also fall victim to the Sentimental notions of female writing.

However, Bunina wrote at a time when the majority of contemporary Russian women could not expect their oeuvre to provide them with a stable income. In order to make ends meet, she needed to maneuver between the limitations of the literary marketplace and patronage.

Bunina was not the only female author who employed an invocation to the muse to adapt it to her critical purposes. Anna Laetitia Barbauld (née Aikin, 1743-1825), a notable English poet and author of children's literature, does so in her poem "Washing Day" (1797).²⁷ While Bunina apologetically talks about it on her own behalf in a footnote, Barbauld raises it to a new level and creates an innovative poetic device.

"Washing Day" presents an account of the day when the women of the household were washing the clothes. Under Barbauld's ironic pen, the laundry day turns into a battleground where it is women, who amidst the all the preparations and turmoil, remind us of troops deploying on a battlefield, while the husband who "call'st thyself perchance the master there" (line 34), is "displaced," as Johns-Putra aptly notes, and whose "garden walks [are] physically obstructed by lines of washing veritably flapping in his face and his demands for food [are] given short shrift" (74). In this way, the washing day, being truly the women's realm, appears as a trope for the absence of patriarchal authority in the home (74).

Barbauld cues the reader to the burlesque character of the poem by trivializing the inspiring muse with "The Muses are turned gossips; they have lost / The buskined step, and clear high-sounding phrase, / Language of gods" (ll. 1-3). The speaker then summons "the *domestic* Muse" (l.3, emphasis added) to come and "sing the dreaded washing day"

²⁷ Though thematically "Washing Day" deviates from other poems analyzed here, it is worth discussing due to its innovative approach to the device of invocation of the muse.

(l. 8). The muse's singing thereby sounds like the very mundane "loosely prattling on / Of farm or orchard, pleasant curds and cream, / Or drowning flies, or shoe lost in the mire" (l. 4-6). In this way, by ostensibly subscribing to the idea of the triviality of women's writings and, by extension, women's muse, Barbauld subverts those same gender-defined poetic conventions. For, if the muse is "domestic," attached to the female and, ostensibly, trite "petty miseries of life," she may not be regarded as a creative prophetic authority.

It is noteworthy that such a reduced role of the traditional epic muse potentially works on several textual levels at once. First, Barbauld makes multiple allusions to the "writings of Milton, Shakespeare, Pope, Burke, Swift, and Coleridge, to name but a few" (Bordo 189) throughout the poem. However, she often does so by altering them and turning their meaning back upon themselves. For example, she takes a quotation from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* as her epigraph but modifies it to read "and their voice / turning again towards chiding treble, pipes / And whistles in its sound" instead of the original "and his big manly voice" and "his sound," as Bordo notes (189) and argues that by appropriating traditionally male poetic style, language, and poetic devices but assigning the opposite meaning to them, Barbauld is able to inhabit literary discourse traditionally occupied by male poets and show that "genre [is] nothing more (indeed nothing less) than artificial performance" (188).

Since the speaker invokes the muse in the beginning and if the speaker is only the recipient of the muse's wisdom and the verses are sung by the muse instead, then it follows that the source of these inverted and distorted allusions is the muse. The profane "domestic" character of the muse, combined with the burlesque nature of the mock-

heroic poetry, creates narration that disguises the author's persona and may shield the author from any potential accusations of impropriety and undue ambition. This is exactly Barbauld's point, and it is the alteration of the initial invocation of the muse which constructs the disguised narration to explore the possibilities and limitations in the conversation of politics, culture, art, and society.

Thus, both Bunina and Barbauld employ the muse in the role of a deceiver as a way to receive "permission" to speak on political, cultural, religious, and societal matters, otherwise deemed inappropriate. In "Conversation between Me and the Women," Bunina creates a speaker who appears to be only the recipient of the muse's wisdom, whereas, in reality, this disguise allows her to express her own position. While Bunina only walks the line of defiance and hints at such usage of the figure of the muse, the British poet Anna Laetitia Barbauld develops it as a new poetic device. In "Washing Day," Barbauld designs a speaker who only conveys the wisdom sung by the Muse. This relieves the speaker of creative agency. The Muse, in her turn, embraces a specific persona; it is a "domestic Muse" and, therefore, can hardly be recognized as a prophetic sacred figure.

In conclusion, through a brief analysis of Russian women poets from the second half of the eighteenth century to the first professional female poet of the early nineteenth century, we begin to notice a fast progression between the way Ekaterina Urusova, Alexandra Murzina, and Anna Bunina wrote about what it meant to be a woman poet. If in the 1770s Urusova expressed her defense of women's character only cautiously, by showing that women can convey a positive influence on society, at the turn of the century Murzina already openly and vehemently protests against biased attitudes toward women and their intellectual abilities. In the 1810s, Anna Bunina, the first Russian woman poet

to make a living from her writing, places the question of female authorship in the center of her work. She examines the larger implications of what it was to be a woman poet, beyond the inner conflict of ambition and self-doubt, but also the tension between the poles of male and female audiences, each of which imposes their own expectations and assumptions on the poet. However, what is important in her work is not only that she critiques the beliefs consigning women to the secondary role of the *poetess* that expected women poets to focus on “domestic affections, religious piety, and patriotic passions” (Greene, 2008, 265), but also the way she constructed her arguments poetically. Unlike Urusova and Murzina, who spoke directly to their readers with carefully constructed poems, Bunina either playfully and humorously exposes and subverts gender-defined poetic conventions (as if through a dialogue between a woman poet and her alter ego) or by means of a deceptive mask of a muse.

However, if one examines another tradition of women’s writing, the British one, by selecting several poems with similar themes, one may draw a preliminary conclusion that even though the Russian tradition has formally caught up with the Western tradition, there are considerable differences still. For example, where Urusova resorts to the use of fictional heroines, Mary Scott has no shortage of literary models for *The Female Advocate*, and, in the case of Mary Julia Young, her obstacles are further complicated by competition in the literary marketplace (including competition with other female authors), while for Janet Little her class and nationality prove to be crucial. Although it is difficult to compare women poets by virtue of their differences, this comparison is also a fruitful one. It reveals that, compared with Russia, in Britain a woman poet was no longer something extraordinary, and in Janet Little’s situation, a woman poet of working-class

and non-dominant culture was able to publish her works and hope to attain success, while the development of subversive modes acquires a much more sophisticated character, as was the case with Anna Laetitia Barbauld.

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